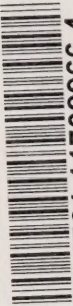


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# THE CONCRETE WOMB

By John Phillips, Abbotsford



NATIONAL PAROLE BOARD  
OTTAWA, ONTARIO





## THE CONCRETE WOMB

*By John Phillips, Abbotsford*

After a number of years in corrections in California, 14 to be specific, I am still intrigued by the fact that so many prison inmates seem to prefer prison to freedom. As a counselor at San Quentin State Prison I've interviewed thousands of inmates individually and have sat in hundreds of counseling groups, listening to inmates talk – rather uninhibitedly – about their experiences and feelings while in jails and prisons and “on the streets” before and after incarceration. Also, prior to coming to San Quentin I was a parole officer for about 3 years, during which I received a hundred or so parolees from various state prisons, tried to help them cope with the streets, and then had to send a good share of them back to prison when they failed to make the difficult transition to the so-called “free world.”

From these contacts over the years I have deduced, as I am sure you have also, that many prisoners not only do not mind so much being in prison, they even prefer prison to the streets. A few will actually come right out and ask the parole officer to send them back. But many more will arrange matters so that the parole officer has no choice but to send them back. Many others are so inept in the commission of their crimes or their escapes or in circumventing the rules of parole that they seem to be asking to be locked up.

How many prisoners actually do prefer prison to freedom? This isn't a question you can ask a prisoner until you have his confidence. Besides having to discount false answers that are intended to either flatter or disconcert, you must also contend with the inability of many prisoners to identify and verbalize their feelings, or their tendency to vacillate in their feelings according to the ups and downs of immediate events, or refuse to admit feelings that are not admirable. This is the bugaboo of much correctional research. Someone with the skill, time, and resources should test the hypothesis that a substantial number of prison inmates are not motivated to try to get out and stay out. However, in the absence of scientific evidence, my “educated guess” is that one out of three in a place like San Quentin\* fall in this class.

This educated guess is based on personal observation and is supported by the observations of colleagues with an equally good opportunity to investigate the problem.

Even if it is only one out of four, one out of 10, or just one out of 100, it is still too much with the cost of keeping a man in prison for a year being often as much as keeping him in a university. Prisons are built of concrete and steel with high walls and fences to keep people in – the escape of one man is the occasion for much excitement and agitation among the custodial staff and vivid newspaper headlines, not to mention twinges among the ulcers of the administrators. But a much more insidious problem is the man who escapes *into* prison. Who gets excited about him? Instead we are privately glad to have him he helps to swell the ranks of “trusties,” minimum-custody men without whom we couldn't operate jails, prisons, and camps so easily. The problem inmate we are concerned with here is not the inmate who conforms to the rules out of fear of punishment or hope of regard—he is instead the man who doesn't think of escape, who doesn't give more than a token effort to earning parole, or if paroled doesn't try very hard to stay out, and when returned seems relieved to be back.

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\* San Quentin is a medium-security state institution for felons, current population 3500, average age 30 divided 50–50 between crimes against persons and crimes against property.





This lack of fear of prison is not only incomprehensible to the average citizen, whose knowledge of penology is sketchily gained from the sensationalism of newspapers, movies and the TV, but even to many prison employees with years of experience. If not incomprehensible, then their reaction is that we obviously must be treating the prisoner too well. The popularity of this idea was illustrated by a recent comedy skit on TV in which the prisoner who had served his time had to be dragged out, kicking and screaming, by the guards just as if he were going to the gas chamber. It is certainly true that except for the regimentation and restriction on movement they are well-treated. Practically all of them come out of prison in better physical shape than when they came in; the result of plenty of sleep, regular and wholesome meals, no alcohol or dope, free medical and dental care, and no worries about bills.

Americans like to think that they love liberty and abhor regimentation, with its suppression of individualism and its promotion of mass conformity. That is one reason why prisons traditionally suppress liberty and individualism and enforce regimentation and conformity: the psychic pain of this deprivation of liberty is supposed to act as an effective punishment and/or deterrent to misbehavior. (The other reason is that large groups of men are so much easier to handle if regimented.) Yet many men do not seem to mind the loss of liberty. Perhaps the love of liberty has never been strong and universal, except in our folklore. There have always been men who preferred to be regimented: religious orders for centuries have depended upon volunteers, as have the armies of the world until quite recently. As the country becomes urbanized the necessity for learning to live in close proximity will make regimentation seem more tolerable, even attractive.

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I think some of the reasons some prisoners readily accept and even prefer, the regimented, crowded, unprivate, restricted life of prison include the following:

First, for some it is a return to a childlike state of dependency and irresponsibility. The State provides food, clothing, housing, medical care, and entertainment, and asks nothing in return but superficial compliance with a few rules which are easily understood if not always logical. Furthermore, inmates can gratify their dependency needs without even having to feel grateful, or to feel guilty for not feeling grateful. After all, they reason, we are being "punished," and who is supposed to feel grateful for being punished? Further, they reason, the State has a duty to take care of us, we are "wards" of the State — we didn't ask to be sent here.

There is also the childlike excitement of being able to "beat the State" occasionally by breaking the rules. This is for those who are ambivalent about their dependency-needs gratification and need to demonstrate their independency by biting the hand that feeds them. The hand-biters, if caught, well realize that the State is stymied in the punishment it can mete out: it can't use corporal punishment, it can't refuse to take care of them, and it can't throw them out. It can only add time to their sentences, or deprive them still further of freedom of movement, or deprive them for brief periods of some privileges.

Further, there is no sense of obligation to become a law-abiding citizen: the prisoner feels he is paying a debt to society, so when the time is served the debt is paid and everyone starts over again. They can even rationalize their crimes so that they appear in their own eyes to be victims rather than transgressors: "Everyone is doing it, I was just unlucky enough to be caught." "I was broke, nobody would give me a job, so there was nothing left for me to do but to pick up a gun and pull a robbery." "In any other state what I did wouldn't even be a felony." Actually, being in prison for many men is not an experience that affects them very deeply. As the prison expression goes, "I can do time, so long as they don't (mess) with my mind." This refers to psychotherapy or anything else that attempts to make him





doubt that his perception of himself, of society, and of the purpose of life is not real, not true, and not in his own best interests. This self-doubt, or guilt, is more painful than anything else we can do to him. This is why they seem to fear the psychiatrists most of all.

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Secondly, life in prison is simple when compared to life outside the walls. one quickly learns the ropes, what to expect, what the important rules are, how far one can go in pushing the limits, how to get what one wants, and how to manipulate the keepers. There is security in knowing the limits of choice and movement. The necessity for making decisions is severely limited: No questions of which suit to put on in the morning, where or what to eat, what movie to see, and no budget decisions to make if you have no income anyways. As one man put it, "The first time you come to prison you are scared – you've heard a lot of bad things about the joint. But the second time you know what to expect and so you aren't so scared. The third and fourth times are nothing." Another says, "You don't know what to expect when you hit the streets. It's easier coming in than going out." Only a few men have concrete plans for after their release. It is difficult to get most of them to think about the future, beyond the day of release. They complain they do "hard time" when they think about the real world. Therefore, many shut out the real world of adult problems and adult responsibilities, confining their circle of awareness to the unreal world of prison that is immediately around them.

Of course, many prisoners read newspapers and magazines, listen to the radio and even watch TV. But generally their interest in outside events is limited to the pleasant and the entertaining, as is true with millions of their fellow citizens outside the walls. The World Series is an important annual event, with a holiday mood that disrupts the prison schedule. But the world of sports and entertainment is not the real world – and it doesn't threaten to propel one into the real world. Those whose interest in even the more pleasant aspects of life outside has waned to the point that these events fail to arouse a flicker of emotion other than fear can be said to have become, in the words of Clemmer, "prisonised." The walls now serve to shut the world out, to protect those inside rather than those outside. Curiously, alcoholics and narcotic addicts generally adjust well in prison in spite of their being deprived of regular supplies of alcohol or drugs sufficient to maintain the level of addiction that previously seemed so necessary.

The dependency, lack of responsibility, and extreme predictability of prison life seem to offer them the kind of existence they sought through alcohol or dope. To the man with a fear of his sexual drive or a feeling of sexual inadequacy, and many alcoholics and addicts seem to fall in this group, prison offers protection through isolation from women which exempts them from having to respond to the prevailing social pressures to act as if they really enjoyed normal social and sexual contacts with women. Likewise, protection is offered to the man who fears the domination of women. The homosexual, of course, is in his or her element when put in an all-male or all-female society. The male homosexual prostitute in prison enjoys increased demand for his services since there is no female competition. There are enough latent active and passive homosexuals, or at least bisexuals, in the general population to provide the basis for a thriving commerce when some of them find themselves in prison.

Many men besides homosexuals find prison life provides as many opportunities for exploiting their talents as life outside. Leaders can find willing followers; followers can find willing leaders; predators can find victims; and compulsive victims can find cooperative assailants. Robbers can continue to acquire goods by force and fear, burglars and thieves can continue to steal both from the State and from their fellow inmates. Confidence men can find easy marks. Gamblers can operate games of chance and make book on various sporting events in or out of the prison. We have even had men counterfeit paper money, and a group at Folsom State Prison defrauded the Government of tax refunds through fraudulent returns.

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True, the pickings aren't great, but there is an old Russian proverb that "In a country where everyone is barefoot, a pair of shoes makes a man a prince." The engineering of a successful theft of a dozen steaks from the butcher shop invests a convict with as much professional status as knocking over a supermarket, and the successful looting of a couple dozen cheap wrist-watches from the Inmate Canteen ranks with the celebrated Brinks robbery.

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On a more legitimate plane, the paucity of usable skills among the incoming inmates creates a competition among the various prison departments for men who can do a job for them. Therefore, the man who was an indifferent plumber, carpenter, or mechanic on the outside now finds himself sought after. Perhaps he can even become a leadman ("con boss") with status and authority beyond that which he has ever previously enjoyed. There are many jobs for inmates where the incumbent has favors to bestow on friends or to sell to others. The point is that some men find much more status and relative affluence in prison than out, which makes release a come-down. They experience nostalgia after they have been out a while, when the rosy dreams have been shattered and replaced by the cold reality of confusion, defeats, and indifference or outright rejection. Given sufficient nostalgia for the security of prison life and an inability to find substitute satisfactions in normal life, it is easy to (consciously or unconsciously) arrange a return to prison. Often he is like the soldier who can hardly wait for his discharge but discovers afterward that he is lost and lonely away from the army, and so re-enlists. You'd think it was Old Home Week to see some men greet their old buddies when they hit the Big Yard again after a spell outside.

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Which brings me to perhaps the most important factor in bringing men back to prison — loneliness. There is little or no privacy in a large prison: they sleep one or two in a tiny cell, closely packed in a building with hundreds of others. They eat, work, and play in large groups. They are rarely alone. For many of them this is, or becomes from time to time, intolerable. Therefore they escape by watching TV or movies, reading, or by day-dreaming. "Tripping," which is to take a trip outside the walls by day-dreaming, is practised by practically all inmates to some extent. A few achieve a complete escape this way, becoming "stir-crazy," or psychotic. Yet for some inmates this being always in a crowd gives them the illusion of belonging, of identity. They all dress alike and share similar experiences, and thus begin to think of themselves as "convicts." Perhaps you think it isn't very admirable to be a "convict," but to be a convict is better than to be nothing. To be a convict is to be something, to have an identity, a role, a set of defenses, a ready-made model on which to pattern all one's interpersonal relationships. It is a role that has meaning and utility in a prison, if nowhere else. The staff rewards those who accept the role gracefully. It has social security, in the broader sense, since he "belongs." Although alienated from the larger society, we have given him a substitute society. Unfortunately, when he leaves prison the role no longer is useful and appropriate, but often he is reluctant to abandon that for which he has paid so much to achieve and acquire. Therefore he is tempted to return to the prison where this hard-earned role has value.

To ask the convict, the addict, the alcoholic, the homosexual, the thief, to give up his respective role and social posture in his sub-culture is to ask him to become nothing. Is it any wonder they resist our efforts to "rehabilitate" them? Especially when we are hard put to make the alternative — being a law-abiding, respectable, conforming, sober 8-to-5 working, middle-class, family man — sound interesting, challenging, rewarding and exciting. Young men need adventure and new experience to balance the familiar and the secure. It is the contrast between security and insecurity, hunger and satiation, comfort and discomfort, that makes life interesting. Thus if one always loses, one despairs; if one always wins, one is bored. And therefore we have difficulty in presenting the "normal" way of life as an attractive alternative to the "criminal" way of life. For example, folklore has made Robin Hood the hero rather than the sheriff,





who was probably only doing his job.

Living through the same experiences, and especially ones which involve adventures, hardships, competition, or conflict, such as soldiers, prisoners, mountain-climbers, students in tough courses and athletes do, creates a pleasurable feeling of belonging to a special group. Having successfully overcome these common difficulties makes them feel worthwhile and gives them commonalities through which to communicate with each other. They develop a jargon. Quoting Carl Rogers, one of the deepest human needs is for affiliation and communications with others. People who have found themselves in a group which meets this need wish to perpetuate this gratification through an alumni association, veterans organizations, old-timers club, etc.

Released prisoners also wish to do this, even though this is forbidden to parolees. An ex-convict often feels more at ease with another ex-convict than with his relatives, even his wife. The poignant statement, "You can't go back home again," is too often true. Some men report they dread visits while in prison because their and their visitor's lives are so far apart that they have nothing to talk about. Some men make arrangements for keeping contact with their prison buddies even before they leave.

Others who have declared they want nothing to do with ex-convicts after they get out, become lonely, weaken, and begin to patronize bars where ex's are likely to hang out. The local parole office is also a good place to renew old acquaintances. Another good place is the weekly Nalline clinic for addict-parolees. Rejection, or even just the anticipation of rejection, tends to drive them together for mutual support. They have gone "outside" into free society but it takes time to learn to adjust to it. For those who have not previously experienced normal living, this adjustment is most difficult, if not impossible. Some will tell you that they are willing to "put down the gun and pick up the lunch-bucket" to give the "square-john" life a fair trial. A fair trial for many means of course, just until the first frustration, after which they quickly revert to a more comfortable way of life. Too many men want to be rejected so as to justify their return to crime.

The narcotic addict is even more so a special case of ingroupness. Not only has he shared the special experience of prison with other convicted felons, he has also shared the special experience of addiction with other addicts. This makes it doubly difficult for him to feel at home in a non-prison, non-addict environment. Even in prison the addicts feel an identification as a special sub-group, with their own jargon, their own rallying cry ("w are being persecuted by the unfair narcotic laws"), and an interest in news about their fellow-addicts in other prisons and on the street. Even this sub-group is subdivided: the heroin users consider themselves a cut above the users of other opiates and synthetics, who in turn consider themselves a cut above the marijuana-smokers, who wouldn't be accepted at all as members if the law didn't give them official status as narcotic users. And they all consider themselves miles above the unspeakable alcoholics: "You never saw an addict laying in the gutter, did you?"

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I once talked to a man who stated emphatically that he would not accept a parole unless it was to the merchant marine. He came in at age 18 and has been here for 10 years. He frankly was afraid to go out unless it was to a living situation which resembled prison. He saw a job on a ship as such a protected, confined life. Port wouldn't worry him because no matter where he might be in the world his bunk and his mess-mates would always be with him. You might speculate that he unconsciously believes that a sailor in a ship on the ocean is a fetus in a steel bag in a huge womb. Is San Quentin a concrete womb? I'm afraid it is for this man and for some more like him.





There are many men like this would-be sailor who are not actually undergoing either punishment or rehabilitation by being in prison – they are, or have become refugees from the real world of the streets, like the men who escaped into monasteries from the chaos of the Middle Ages in Europe. The longer they stay the harder it is for them to return. Normal adult responsibilities are not automatically assumed upon reaching 21. Many adolescents refuse to grow up because they look around and see that being an adult isn't as much fun as being a teen-ager. Keeping delinquently-oriented delayed-adolescents too long in the artificial child-world of prison aggravates the problem since one doesn't learn to swim without water in which to practise, nor to be an adult without an adult world in which to practise.

I recall that army psychiatrists during the war found that soldiers who cracked up during combat would recover sooner and could be sent back to the lines sooner if they were not evacuated so far back that they could no longer hear the guns.

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Many of us feel that maximum use should be made of local means for handling felons: short jail sentences coupled with long probationary periods and return to county jail for probation violation rather than commitment to prison; local out-patient clinics for counseling and psychotherapy; greater use of week-end sentences and work-furlough plans which wouldn't interrupt the man's supporting himself and his family. Prison sentences over one year for the type of men that I have described above merely aggravate the problem of having to learn a new way of life when he is released, since he must first begin to think of himself as belonging in a non-prison role, and to exchange the prisoner's value system for another; all the while that his mannerisms and argot tend to identify him as an ex-convict. Due to the common prejudice against ex-convicts he is not often permitted to change, neither by the "good" people nor by the "bad" people.

What helps integrate some men into normal society after a period of incarceration are "half-way houses" by means of which the released prisoner makes a gradual transition from the regimented protectiveness of prison to the freedom and responsibility of the streets. There are already operating in California several half-way houses for prisoners, alcoholics, addicts, and mental patients. Briefly, a halfway house provides not only meals and a place to live but a congenial atmosphere and some professional counselling. The residents usually work around the house or on outside jobs. There are regular contacts with individuals and groups in the community, with the intent of making the resident feel more comfortable in the community. In work-furlough programs, such as the Huber Plan, the prisoner lives in the jail except during the hours he is working on his outside job or is actively seeking employment. He likewise pays for his room and board.

A further extension of the half-way house and work-furlough ideas should be explored: combined in the "half-way community" where inmates could live with their families and work daytimes away from the compound on regular jobs. This isn't a new idea: it has actually been tried in various places, the Philippines and Mexico among others. Naturally, not all inmates are going to appreciate being unable to escape from the obligation to work and to support their families. But isn't the proper task of corrections to motivate people to assume their rightful roles in society?

Instead, we often go too far in conditioning men to prison life, so that the road back is too hard; even though we notice that "good" inmates often are poor parolees. Unfortunately, a goodly supply of relatively innocuous recidivists (i.e. drunks, addicts, check-writers, etc.) is useful to the prison bureaucracy. They make good factory workers and farm hands and without them there couldn't be an extensive system of conservation camps. Thus there is little incentive to us prison workers to reduce recidivism in this category of prisoner.





In conclusion, may I reiterate that so long as some of the men coming into our prisons really do not mind being there, or have consciously or unconsciously sent themselves there, or with long sentences have become conditioned to this way of life, we cannot expect out-moded methods of rehabilitation to do much good in helping these men to develop the personal characteristics that will make them good citizens of a democratic society.

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